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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001732

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR AMBRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MICHEL MURR WANTS TO LURE MARCH 8  
CANDIDATES FOR INDEPENDENT LIST

REF: A. BEIRUT 1729  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1722

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) Greek Orthodox MP Michel Murr told the Ambassador December 5 that he hoped to draw candidates away from the opposition March 8 alliance to his independent candidate list for the 2009 parliamentary elections. Not wanting to harm Saad Hariri's March 14, Murr said he was not targeting potential candidates from March 14 Christians. By his calculation, Murr believed his list could win 12 seats, in heavily contested districts. Murr appeared very confident about the strength of his alliance with the Armenian Tashnaq party, which is currently allied with March 8. Murr accused the international community of "retreating" from its professed goals of bolstering a moderate, sovereign Lebanon by not providing enough financial support for these candidates to compete with the opposition, whose financial backing comes from Iran, he alleged. Murr advised the incoming U.S. administration to quickly develop an action plan for Lebanon and not to separate Lebanon from other regional issues. End summary.

DRAWING CANDIDATES AWAY FROM MARCH 8  
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[1](#)2. (C) Greek Orthodox senior political figure Michel Murr told the Ambassador, PolOff, and Senior Political LES December 5 that he was focused on trying to draw candidates away from opposition leader Michel Aoun and the March 8 alliance. Murr emphasized that he did not wish to harm Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition by drawing its candidates to his independent list, such as current MP and head of Parliament's Administration and Justice Committee Robert Ghanem. (Note: Ghanem, and some other independent Christians allied with March 14, have expressed frustration that Hariri would prefer to impose candidates in Christian districts, rather than allow the Christians to choose their own. End note.)

MURR'S ELECTORAL MAP  
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[1](#)3. (C) In a conversation focused almost exclusively on Murr's electoral strategy, Murr claimed that his list of

independents could win at least 12 seats in the upcoming 2009 parliamentary elections. By his calculation, Murr said that his list would win four seats in the Metn (his home district), two in Kesrwan, one in Jbeil, one in Baabda, and four other Armenian seats. These four districts would be hotly contested, Murr opined. In areas such as Zahle, Murr believed there would not be an independent list, but Christian candidates not allied with Aoun would run on March 14's candidate list. MP Nayla Mouawad (allied with March 14), a representative of majority Christian Zgharta district, reportedly visited Murr to ask his assistance to gain support from two financiers living in the Metn to support Mouawad's son, Michel, in his candidacy. Murr said he promised Mouawad he would help, and also suggested that Mouawad also reach out to the Saudis for additional financial support.

¶4. (C) Murr nonchalantly confirmed that he meets with President Sleiman every week, ostensibly to discuss efforts to build an independent list. (Note: To date, Murr is the most vocal, publicly, urging Sleiman to form his own parliamentary bloc. Others, such as independents allied with March 14 in Kesrwan, for example, express similar desires privately, but not publicly. End note.) However, Sleiman would not show support for any candidates until one to two months before the election, he said.

MURR OVERLY CONFIDENT ABOUT TASHNAQ?  
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¶5. (C) Murr said he met December 4 with members of the Armenian Tashnaq delegation who traveled to Syria on December

BEIRUT 00001732 002 OF 003

¶1. The Tashnaq delegation, long-time allies of Murr, said they told Syrian President Bashar Asad that Murr was their only ally, Murr claimed. Murr cautioned the Ambassador not to misinterpret Tashnaq's visit, as he expected several Tashnaq candidates would be invited to join March 14's candidate list. Hariri agreed to this arrangement prior to his recent trip to Moscow, Murr said, but had not yet called Murr or Tashnaq to sign an agreement. (Note: We think Murr is exaggerating, or at least premature. Hariri told the Ambassador December 4 that he did not trust Tashnaq and would not ally with them (ref A). And a Tashnaq representative told DCM that while they are loyal to Murr, they are not convinced Murr should be head an any independent bloc (ref B). End note.)

¶6. (C) He continued that Lebanon's Christian communities, writ large, would oppose any leader determined to reconcile with Syria, citing Michel Aoun's December 3-7 visit to Damascus. Murr admitted that Syria also invited him to visit, prior to inviting Tashnaq. However, he claimed he would not consider the visit until after the elections.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS ABSENT,  
MONEY NECESSARY TO COMPETE  
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¶7. (C) Murr complained that the international community was slipping in its professed goal for Lebanese moderates to win the elections. This "vacuum," Murr claimed would be exploited by Syria. Following recent criticism of Saudi Arabia by members of the opposition, Murr said he visited the Saudi ambassador to Lebanon. The Saudi ambassador, according to Murr, was "depressed." In Murr's view, if the Saudi response was weak, the Syrians would only continue their attacks, through the Lebanese opposition. Murr characterized Saudi Arabia as being "neutralized," Egypt as "retreating," the Americans as "absent," and the French as "flirting with the Syrians."

¶8. (C) In addition, Murr was convinced that independents, such as those on his candidate list, and March 14 required more financial support to compete successfully in the elections. Alleged financial support from Saudi Arabia, he

said, was not being properly used. For his home district of the Metn, Murr said he has allocated USD 10 million of his own money to back his candidates. He was certain that Iran had already allocated USD 16 million for use by opposition candidates in the same district. Murr also alleged that Aoun had spent USD 2.5 million to install an electricity generator and provide an ambulance to the village of Baskinta, which has a number of votes that would normally not justify such largesse. "How can we compete when the opposition receives suitcases full of cash?," he asked.

MESSAGE FOR THE NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION  
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¶9. (C) Murr believed that the first priority of the incoming Obama administration would be the U.S. economy, but Lebanon "cannot wait," he said. Murr advocated that the administration develop an "action strategy" for Lebanon to counter Lebanese concerns regarding the perception of a new U.S. strategy toward Syria and Iran. He advised that Lebanon could not be considered separate from other regional issues, such as the Middle East Peace Process, because of the presence of Palestinians residing in Lebanon. Nor should the Iranian nuclear issue be negotiated without recalling Iran's links to Lebanon through Hizballah, he said.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Michel Murr is confident in his ability to form an independent bloc that Sleiman could support. He could succeed, but for now we retain some skepticism. We have heard complaints about the prospect of Murr heading an independent list from some who would be interested in joining it. He is leaning toward March 14 but it is by no means clear that he will be able to bring his key allies, the

BEIRUT 00001732 003 OF 003

Tashnaq party, with him. He says he has Hariri's agreement to something that Hariri told Ambassador adamantly he won't do: invite Tashnaq candidates to join March 14's lists. But Michel Murr has been a master at Lebanese politics for decades and will no doubt be a key player, so we will continue to track his efforts as the electoral season heats up. End Comment.

SISON